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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined teachers' and principals' attitudes toward responsibility for student disciplinary action are presented in this paper. Two questionnaires compared principal and teacher responses to vignettes of specific disciplinary situations. In the first survey, 40 elementary principals, 40 secondary principals, 40 elementary teachers, and 40 secondary teachers were asked to identify who was responsible for each situation. The second survey, which rated the severity of the incidents, was administered to another 160 respondents with the same composition as the first group. The overall response rate was 57 percent. Findings indicate that a generally strong agreement existed among all groups with regard to the severity of incidents, and a strong agreement existed between elementary and secondary personnel about responsibility and severity. More severely rated incidents were viewed as the principal's job and moderately severe incidents were viewed as teachers' responsibility. A conclusion is that although there was much agreement about the handling of some disciplinary incidents, teacher and principal roles were not clearly delineated for others. (5 references) (LMI)

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Who's Responsible for Handling Disciplinary Incidents?: Contrasts of Principal and Teacher Perceptions at the Elementary and Secondary Levels

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Who's Responsible for Handling Disciplinary Incidents?: Contrasts of Principal and Teacher Perceptions at the Elementary and Secondary Levels

Discipline as an issue in public schools has been addressed extensively in terms of both prevention and intervention. Programs addressing student discipline have been toward a positive approach of prevention, focusing on rights and responsibilities rather than rules (NSBA, 1979). Although misbehavior has been curtailed successfully by many programs, it has not been eliminated and intervention remains necessary.

Involvement with discipline has traditionally been considered a part of the principal's role, with the principal often seen as instrumental in schools noted for good discipline (Calabrese, 1985). The leadership style of the principal appears to be a critical factor in differentiating safe schools from those having trouble (NAESP, 1981). Students have also identified discipline as the most important duty of the principal (McEwan, 1985). Curwin and Mendler in Discipline with Dignity (1988) advise the administrator be a key person in facilitating the approaches requiring contacts with chronically disruptive students.

In situations requiring discipline, the responsibility for intervention rests with classroom teachers and principals. According to assumptions about the handling of misbehavior (Duke, 1977), discipline problems are usually seen as classroom rather than school problems. Yet discipline per se is usually seen as the administration's concern. Responsibility for disciplinary action in individual situations then could be unclear to teachers and principals. The perception of the severity of the problem could also be a determining factor in determining where the responsibility rests.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine who teachers and principals felt was responsible for disciplinary action in prescribed situations. Vignettes representative of behavior problems found in schools were cited as examples. To assess if severity of the problem was a factor in determining where the responsibility rests, a parallel study was conducted to determine and contrast teachers' and principals' perceptions of the severity of each of the vignettes. As well as being contrasted by position (principal or teacher), both studies were also contrasted by level (elementary or secondary).

Methods

This study was a comparative survey where principal and teacher perceptions were compared and contrasted in regard to specific disciplinary problems. The questionnaires listed 24 vignettes, each dealing with student infractions. Two separate samples of teachers and principals were surveyed using the same vignettes for different study purposes. In the first survey, principals and teachers were asked to give their perception about the responsibility for disciplinary action for each of the 24 situations presented. In the second survey, principals and teachers were asked to rate the severity of these student infractions.

Responses to each vignette were tallied and tabled by position (teacher or principal) and by level (elementary or secondary). Average severity ratings were computed overall and for each respondent group. The specific discipline problems

were ranked according to severity. Contrasts of principal and teacher responsibility for these disciplinary incidents was conducted using proportions and correlations as measures of agreement.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed for the purposes of this study. It contained 24 hypothetical situations, each dealing with a different but specific discipline problem typical to education. In the first survey, respondents were asked to identify who was responsible (the principal or the teacher) for handling the disciplinary action for each of the given vignettes. In a parallel investigation, the questionnaire assessed principals' and teachers' perceptions toward discipline problems as they rated the severity of the student infractions on a four-point scale: 4-extremely severe, 3-major problem, 2-moderate problem, and 1-minor infraction. The questionnaires were coded to identify the respondent as belonging to one of four groups: elementary principal, secondary principal, elementary teacher, and secondary teacher.

Data Source

The population surveyed consisted of teachers and principals in elementary and secondary public schools. In the first survey to identify responsibility for handling the disciplinary incident, a total of 160 participants were randomly chosen: 40 elementary principals, 40 secondary principals, 40 elementary teachers, and 40 secondary teachers. In the second survey to rate the severity of the incidents, another 160 participants were randomly selected across the four groups.

This study was limited to regular classroom teachers and principals in public schools. Assistant principals and teachers other than regular classroom teachers were excluded from the analysis.

Results

Overall, there were 182 respondents to the two surveys (57 percent) with 53 percent responding to the responsibility questionnaire and 61 percent responding to the severity questionnaire. Since both investigations were conducted anonymously, there was no follow-up of non-respondents.

From the survey rating the severity of the 24 disciplinary incidents, there was strong overall agreement between all groups with correlations ranging from .85 to .91. Based on the average ratings, the incidents were ranked as most severe to least severe as follows: (1) firearm, (2) drugs, (3) alcohol, (4.5) stealing, (4.5) showing disrespect, (6) problem at extra-curricular activity, (7) excessive profanity, (8) emotional disturbance, (9) cheating, (10) fireworks, (11) chronic non-completion of homework, (12) smoking, (13) poor attitude, (14) vandalism, (15) display of affection, (16) making fun of handicapped student, (17) excessive tardiness, (18.5) cafeteria duty problem, (18.5) lying, (20) bullying, (21) fighting, (22) incident during playground duty, (23) practical joker, and (24) cliques.

In two-way ANOVA analyses of the differences in average ratings by the respondent groups across the 24 incidents, significant main effects were noted for six incidents when analyzed by position (principal or teacher) and for two incidents when analyzed by level (elementary or secondary). There were no significant interaction effects. The incidents teachers rated more severe than did the principals were:

stealing, cheating, fireworks, poor attitude, display of affection, and bullying. The incidents elementary personnel rated more severe than secondary personnel were: chronic non-completion of homework and smoking. Composites of all ratings indicated teachers generally viewed the incidents more severe than did principals, and elementary personnel generally rated the incidents more severe than did secondary personnel.

Responses to the questionnaire asking respondents to indicate who they felt was responsible for handling each of the 24 disciplinary incidents were tabulated with incidents rated from most to least severe. The proportion that indicated the principal should handle the disciplinary incident is given in parentheses: firearm (98), drugs (99), alcohol (94), stealing (86), showing disrespect (80), problem at extra-curricular activity (90), excessive profanity (70), emotional disturbance (62), cheating (19), fireworks (83), chronic non-completion of homework (7), smoking (82), poor attitude (13), vandalism (61), display of affection (64), making fun of handicapped student (10), excessive tardiness (59), cafeteria duty problem (56), lying (28), bullying (44), fighting (15), incident during playground duty (98), practical joker (26), and cliques (13).

There was generally strong agreement between principals and teachers on severity ($r=.97$) and responsibility ($r=.92$) ratings. Likewise, strong agreement was noted between elementary and secondary personnel on severity ($r=.93$) and responsibility ($r=.97$) ratings.

Generally, the more severely the disciplinary incident was rated, the more likely it was viewed as being the principal's responsibility. Overall, there was a moderately strong association ($r=.66$) between severity rating and the proportion viewing the incident as principal's responsibility. When broken down by position, that relationship was $r=.70$ for principals and $r=.57$ for teachers. Broken down by level, the relationship between severity rating and proportion identifying the principal as responsible for handling the incident was $r=.68$ for elementary personnel and $r=.62$ for secondary personnel.

Items inconsistent with the trend (of more severe incidents being primarily viewed as the principal's responsibility) include: cheating, chronic non-completion of homework, poor attitude, and making fun of handicapped student. These items were ranked in the middle of the severity scale, but were primarily seen as teacher's responsibility. However, although ranking low on the severity scale, the discipline incident during playground duty was nearly unanimously viewed as the principal's responsibility.

Educational Importance of the Study

Since schools must contend with such a variety of student discipline problems, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of principals and teachers at elementary and secondary levels be understood. As shown in this study, although there is much agreement in the handling of some disciplinary incidents, the role of principal and teacher are not clearly delineated for other disciplinary incidents.

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